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ABSTRACT

Year after year, students, teachers, administrators, politicians, and parents are faced with the dilemma of reading assessment. Sheila Valencia (1990) feels that reading assessment has become a hot topic because the outcome tends to differ from school to school. Evaluations should be authentic and trustworthy. Roger Farr (1992) has noted that the assessment needs of various groups (teachers, students, school administrators, the public/press and parents) tend to be dramatically different, which can create a kind of wall separating the groups. A Canadian school district (Bembridge, 1992) developed its own assessment system--a Multi-Layered Assessment Package which included a set of procedures accompanied by suggested books, transcripts, and retelling and recording forms. Barbara Kapinus (1994) believes that individualized assessment is an excellent means of evaluation. It is concluded that a customized evaluation procedure should be developed for individual school districts with regard to previous learning and environmental influences. (RS)

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READING ASSESSMENT: THE ONGOING DEBATE

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Reading Assessment: The Ongoing Debate

Year after year, students, teachers, administrators, politicians and parents are faced with the dilemma of reading assessment. Which approach will best assess a child's reading proficiency while satisfying the inquiries of all others concerned? In the past, reading has been evaluated by a series of standardized tests given within the classroom. Environment, culture, and prior learning were never taken in to account and consequently discarded when scoring and evaluating test results. The outcome of the cycle is low test scores, frustrated teachers, angry parents and bewildered bureaucrats. How can children be expected to excel on these examinations when the material they are being tested on is irrelevant to previous learning and life experience?

Who are reading assessment results for?

According to Valencia (1990) there are two competing goals when it comes to assessment: "we need an assessment system that honors the alignment of instruction and assessment, so that we truly hold ourselves and our students accountable for important instructional outcomes. Secondly, we want to communicate to students, parents, administrators, and to ourselves, those inside and outside the classroom , the real literacy achievement of our students (p. 60)."

Ms. Valencia feels that reading assessment has become a hot topic because the outcome tends to differ from school to school. No one knows how to decipher the assessment code and therefore the method becomes suspect to speculation and misrepresentation.

According to Valencia, when considering the evaluation of reading abilities, there are 2 components that should be included in an assessment. The evaluations should be authentic in that they assess "what we have defined and value as real reading". They should also be trustworthy; "clearly establishing procedures for gathering information and for evaluating the quality of that information".

Farr (1992) agrees with Valencia's philosophy and takes it one step farther. In his critique of the reading assessment process, Farr comments on the need for authentic and trustworthy assessment but adds, we must keep in mind that different "audiences" are interested in these test results for different reasons. The audience that Farr refers to is composed of 5 groups; the public/press, school administrators, parents, teachers, and students. Farr notes that "the assessment needs of these general groups tend to be

dramatically different and even contradictory, and if the users of the assessment do not recognize one another's needs, it is because these distinctions create a kind of wall (Farr, 1992). Farr aligns with Valencia in that the "wall" represents a lack of credibility or "trustworthiness (p. 30)."

Customized, individual assessment

In order to overcome the reading assessment barriers, teachers have begun to devise their own forms of assessment. A Canadian school district developed its own measuring tool when it decided that "the commercially available tests did not match its whole language instructional practices." Bembridge (1992) reports that resource teachers realized the need for a new procedure. They agreed that it had to be beneficial to all those concerned yet provide authentic assessment of reading ability.

Over a 5 year period "MAP" was developed; a Multi-Layered Assessment Package which included a "set of procedures accompanied by suggested books, transcripts, and retelling and recording forms" (p. 47). Each layer identified a stage of literacy. The first phase represented reading, the second identified speaking, the third exposed writing and the last included listening. Other layers could be added to identify proficiency in other areas which teachers found to be relevant.

In the same direction of "MAP", a teacher developed assessment, Peter Afflerbach and Kapinus (1993) discuss an evaluation generated by the individual student. A third grade teacher identifies the value of student portfolios in reading assessment. "Summative assessments are used to demonstrate accountability, to check on student competency, to examine the effectiveness of the reading program, and to make placement decisions (p. 63). When used as a tool over the entire year, the portfolio can serve as a component of the assessment process.

Kapinus (1994) continues to investigate reading assessment. When comparing two schools ideas as to what makes a strong assessment, it was clear that each faculty was divided on what was considered the most powerful . "Views about assessment pointed out the values, beliefs, and difficulties involved in trying to change and improve reading assessment" (p. 579). In other words, what works for one community may not meet the needs of another. Kapinus believes individualized assessment is an excellent means of evaluation. She raises the question as to whether bodies of faculties can agree on the content and the procedure for which we assess children.

My perspective

Reading assessment is clearly an important issue. We need to be consistently aware that it should ultimately benefit the student. Administrators, bureaucrats and parents all have a use for assessment but it should not be at the cost of the students. As we have seen, children are encouraged when they can actually see their own progress. Standardized tests do not show our children's reading progress. They provide the "interested" public with a series of numbers which have no relevance inside the classroom. We need to educate the public that these tests and the numbers associated with them do not accurately expose what it is our children are learning. A customized evaluation procedure should be developed for individual districts with regard to previous learning and environmental influences. This approach would prove to be most beneficial to the students. Isn't that the bottom line?

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